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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: ASSESSMENT OF EGYPT'S REGIONAL ROLE IN THE WAKE OF
GAZA

REF: A. CAIRO 98
[B](#). CAIRO 1206 (2008)
[C](#). CAIRO 2475 (2008)

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey
Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D)

Summary and Introduction

[1](#)1. (S/NF) The serious intra-Arab rifts exposed by the Gaza crisis also highlighted both the extent and limitations of Egypt's role in leading the moderate Arab position. The Gaza crisis was only the most recent, and significant, event to expose the polarization of Egypt and Saudi Arabia at one end of the Arab political spectrum, and Syria and Qatar at the other. The impasse has exposed erosion of Egypt's ability to drive a common Arab position, especially in dealing with smaller, affluent Arab states within the consensus-based Arab League system. The Egyptians and moderate Arab partners have also struggled to manage the searing impact of domestic and regional public criticism.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) However, Egypt retains a significant comparative advantage as one of the few Arab states with stature in the West and within the Arab world, and the only major player that has communication with both Israel and Hamas. If the Egyptians can come to fully understand that their role as the "indispensable Arab state" is contingent on being pro-active on key regional issues, including containing Iranian influence, we will continue to have an effective partner to work with, alongside other regional states such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. End Summary.

The Egyptian Foreign Policy Approach

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Egypt seeks to be the "go to" Arab ally for Western powers and at the same time be appreciated in the eyes of the Arab public as defending Arab interests against post-colonial foreign domination. This strategic dichotomy is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as seen in the string of regional crises (e.g. Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon and the intra-Palestinian conflict) and intra-Arab strife. The U.S., in particular, has not been satisfied that Egypt is doing enough, while the Egyptian and regional public increasingly criticizes the GOE for "abdication" of its role as Arab leader (Reftel a)

[1](#)4. (S/NF) At the same time, the Egyptians are concerned at the emerging Arab bloc of states that they see as increasingly webbed into Iran's strategic aim of obtaining regional dominance. Unfortunately, the Egyptian response has often been inadequate or flatfooted. For example, during the 2007 Lebanese political impasse, the GOE, along with the Saudis, were largely outmaneuvered in the Arab League by a pro-Syria bloc. Although the Egyptians did not object to the

substantive result of the March 2007 Doha conference on Lebanon, our interlocutors laid down a clear marker that neither the Qataris nor anyone else would take away the Egyptian lead on the Palestinian issue (Reftel b). A subsequent Qatari foray into the Sudan political conflict elicited similar Egyptian disdain, but no counter-approach or strategy (Reftel c).

¶5. (S/NF) When Egypt came through on the six-month "tahdiya" (calming) in June 2007, it reaffirmed its centrality on Gaza.

But the recent Gaza crisis opened the door for Arab diplomatic competitors, and despite the full attention of EGIS Chief Omar Soliman, the Egyptians and Saudis have barely held the line against those who wish to seat Hamas at an Arab League meeting. Although Arab League Secretary General Moussa is supportive of Egypt's primacy on the Palestinian question, the Arab League itself appears to have lost the ability to manage intra-Arab dynamics at least for the moment.

Maintenance of Egyptian influence

¶6. (S/NF) Egypt is traditionally risk-averse, driven in large part by Mubarak's personality, as well as the desire for stability. But the Egyptians may be waking up to the need for a more dynamic approach. In the run-up to Israel's military action in Gaza, Soliman was well aware of Egypt's political vulnerability, including exposure to withering domestic and regional criticism, but told us that the Egyptian strategic interest was tied to increased pressure on Hamas. Throughout the IDF action, our Egyptian interlocutors privately focused their ire on Syria and Qatar, as opposed to

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Israel. The GOE publicized the arrest of terrorist cells connected with Iran in mid-January. We assess that the Egyptians believe their primary strategic threat is Iran, that the current theater of combat is the intra-Arab struggle for primacy, and the current battle is the intra-Palestinian dispute.

¶7. (S/NF) The Egyptians, along with its traditional Arab partners, have the ability to prevail, but the victory of the moderate Arab position is not a foregone conclusion. If Egypt fails to maintain its influence, the Arab regional consensus may tilt toward Hamas and Iran, and away from support for PA President Abbas and the two-state solution. If Egypt cedes its position as "champion of the Palestinians," it will cement the current domestic opposition charge (Reftel a) that the GOE has failed to deliver on this account, something that could have lasting negative consequences. For these reasons, we should assist Egypt and its partners in the current intra-Arab power struggle however we can.

¶8. (S/NF) In the short term, the Egyptians will need to establish control of the Arab debate over the intra-Palestinian dispute heading into the Arab League annual summit, which is scheduled for late March in Doha. The Egyptian donors conference for Gaza, expected to be held in February, is a good way to maintain the initiative following the Sharm el Sheikh Summit of January 18, but more will be needed.

¶9. (S/NF) Within our bilateral relationship, we need to increase Egyptian confidence that we will support a more assertive GOE approach to blunting Iranian momentum, which extends beyond the current intra-Arab Hamas standoff. The Gaza crisis has demonstrated that Egypt appreciates U.S. support but prefers it more often than not to be quiet and helpful, not public and prescriptive. The Egyptians have requested we consult with them first prior to any new USG regional policy initiative, especially if it involves Syria. We should honor this request, and seek to involve the Egyptians (as well as other regional partners such as Saudi Arabia) in implementation of any new policy approach. For

their part, the Egyptians should be pressed to move forward with naming an ambassador for Iraq and reopening the embassy in Baghdad, and we should urge them to work with the Saudis on supporting the Lebanese Government as parliamentary elections approach.

¶10. (S/NF) The disarray within Arab ranks provides Iran a strategic opening to back extremist groups and move the centrist position away from negotiations and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian. Ultimately it is Egypt, and more specifically President Mubarak's leadership, that will be critical if we are to support the moderate Arab position. The recent crisis over Gaza brought into focus some of the vulnerabilities in Egypt's leadership role, but also highlighted the fact only Egypt was willing and able to step forward with an aggressive diplomatic, propaganda, and political counter-attack against Iran and its proxies.
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